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*not classified*

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

*Memorandum*

SITUATION IN LAOS

27 March 1963



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MEMORANDUM: Situation in Laos

1. Pathet Lao intransigence and persistent intrigues continue to block any real progress toward a viable neutralist solution in Laos. The three factions have made various paper agreements at the Vientiane level, but there has been no meaningful implementation in the provinces. Access to Pathet Lao territory continues to be denied.

2. Efforts by the Pathet Lao to consolidate and expand their influence are being made chiefly at the expense of the weaker neutralist faction rather than the rightist camp which has remained relatively strong and intact. The Pathet Lao's mixed campaign of subversion and coercion has achieved some inroads into the neutralist political and military ranks. However, these very pressures have engendered overall a countervailing trend toward neutralist-rightist cooperation.

3. Souvanna Phouma's failure as yet to provide firm resistance to Pathet Lao machinations has led to criticism of his leadership by various neutralist figures including neutralist military commander, Kong Le. The Pathet Lao, in courting "progressive neutralists" such as Foreign Minister Quinim Pholsena and Colonel Deuane, leader of the dissident faction of the neutralist military establishment, probably hope that these elements eventually will gain ascendancy through Souvanna's own default. In such an outcome, the Pathet Lao would be able to retain a veneer of the Troika formula while actually controlling the key government positions.

4. General Phoumi, leader of the conservative faction, has maintained a judicious balance in his relations with the other two groups in the coalition. He has represented himself as a strong supporter of

Souvanna and the neutralist solution, but has taken care to retain the support of the right-wing military. It is likely that Phoumi expects an eventual collapse of the coalition and another confrontation between the two extreme factions. Having supported the coalition he would be in a position to present himself once more as a candidate for major Western support in a campaign against the Pathet Lao.

5. On the Bloc side, the Soviet Union continues to exercise caution in respect to Laos. Moscow appears content with the Geneva settlement and confident that the weaknesses of the coalition government offer sufficient possibilities for ultimate Communist victory through infiltration and subversion to make unnecessary the risks of intervention by Western powers in the event of a renewal of hostilities. The USSR does not appear disposed to utilize its limited leverage in Laos, although it probably would seek to restrain the Pathet Lao to prevent renewed conflict which might lead to escalation into broader hostilities.

6. As in the past, the Chinese Communists seem content to let the North Vietnamese carry the ball in Laos, except in those border areas contiguous to Communist China. Peiping has avoided the danger of Western intervention by following a circumspect course. Chinese tactics are designed to exploit the weakness of the coalition government in carving out a sphere of influence in northern Laos. In November 1961 the Chinese Communists established a consulate in Phong Saly in charge of a former general officer of the Peoples Liberation Army. The same year they embarked on a road construction program which has buttressed Chinese presence in the area.

7. Laos remains a stepping stone for the Chinese Communists on the way to Thailand as Laos is a stepping stone for the North Vietnamese to South Vietnam. Both Peiping and Hanoi would hesitate to jeopardize their advantage by a resumption of the Laotian conflict.

8. The focal point of Pathet Lao pressure on the neutralists is the strategic Plaine des Jarres where Kong Le has his headquarters and where the bulk of his forces is concentrated. The situation in this area has been tense for weeks, with the neutralists and the Pathet Lao maneuvering for control. Major

conflict has been avoided to date, but any one of a series of incidents could precipitate full-scale hostilities. In an effort to tranquilize the situation, Kong Le has urgently requested Vientiane to arrange for the presence of the International Control Commission (ICC) in the Plaine des Jarres area.

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9. Since last fall the Pathet Lao have been waging a mounting campaign to undermine Kong Le's

Kong Le's supply lines from North Vietnam have been blocked; two pro-Kong Le officials have been assassinated, including Kong Le's field commander in the Plaine des Jarres, Colonel Ketsana; and through Colonel Deuane, new efforts have been made to defect Kong Le garrison forces.

10. Kong Le--who only six months ago was parroting the Communist line--has reacted vigorously to these pressure tactics. He has embarked on a purge of pro-Pathet Lao elements in his ranks, arresting some and transferring others. To improve his logistic position he has arranged for an airlift from Vientiane, utilizing ICC aircraft and American and Soviet planes at the disposal of the Vientiane government. At the same time he has asked the Lao army and US representatives for military supplies. Additionally, he has taken steps to strengthen his defensive posture on the Plaine des Jarres, including the concentration of most of his forces north and west of the Plaine des Jarres airfield and the construction of a "fallback" airstrip at Phou Keng for use in the event the Plaine des Jarres airfield is overrun.

11. Most significant have been Kong Le's efforts to develop contingency defense plans in cooperation with right-wing military elements--primarily Meo guerrilla units--envisaging joint action should the Pathet Lao initiate a major military move.

12. This tentative trend toward a neutralist-conservative alliance undoubtedly is a cause of serious concern to the Communists and in the final analysis could induce them to ease pressure on Kong Le at least

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temporarily. [REDACTED]

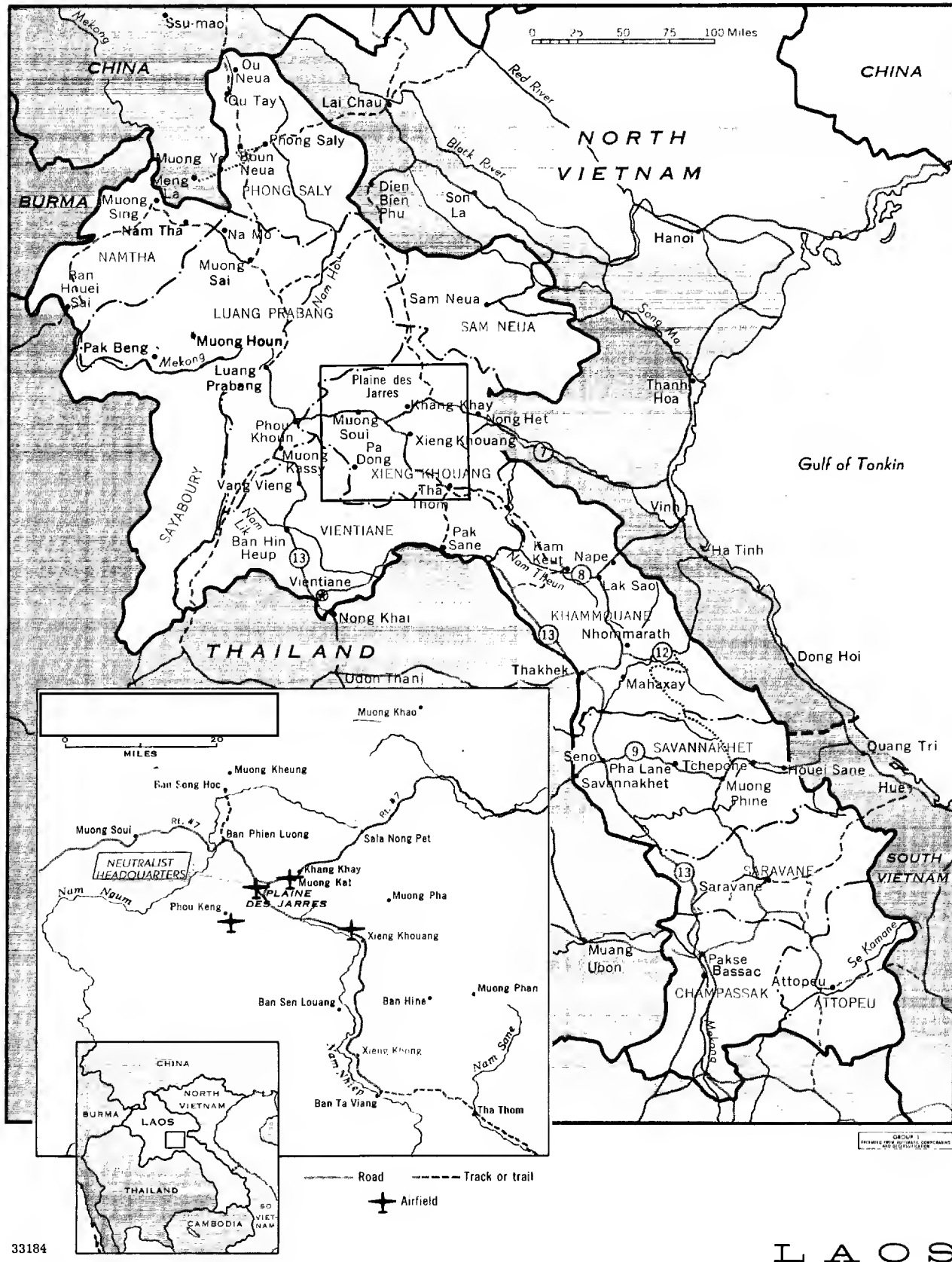
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[REDACTED] (Current order of battle holdings for Laos include 8,500 neutralist, 19,500 Pathet Lao, and 50,000 conservative forces plus 17,000 Meo guerrillas. North Vietnamese troops in Laos are estimated at 2,000 to 5,000 men. The major concentration of neutralist forces--3,000 to 4,000--is in the Plaine des Jarres, with the remainder scattered in various garrisons about the country.)

13. Kong Le, with the forces at his immediate disposal, and if backed by the 5,000 to 6,000 Meo guerrillas in the hills surrounding the Plaine des Jarres, probably could make a stand against any unilateral move by Pathet Lao forces in the area. However, if the North Vietnamese were to give direct support to the Pathet Lao, it is unlikely Kong Le could manage more than a brief holding action.

14. Barring some unexpected development in the situation, however, the Communists probably will continue to attempt to erode Kong Le's position rather than seek direct action against him.

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